



When the Rooster Crows

Despite the still impressive snow pack covering our place on the Chippewa National Forest, last week some strips of green grass had shown up wherever trails have been plowed with the bobcat. Thinking my poor coop-bound chickens were as sick of winter as was I, I opened the gate to their pen. They could peck around on these oases of a season yet to come. But something was missing. Rather than put the big, old rooster through another winter, when things froze up last fall we shortened his life. Now that the birds were running around, at least sort of, I was missing his crowing.

Courtesy of our very kindly neighbors, a replacement rooster was located. Oliver was delivered to our place when we were not home, but we knew he was there because the gunny sack he came in was hanging on a fence post. Oliver, however, was not in sight that first evening. Apparently he had not appreciated his little road trip, and had gone into hiding. I hoped nothing untoward had happened to him. There's been a rather steady stream of roosters at our place. Oliver is number 20.

When I came home from work the second day, there was Oliver underneath the bird feeder, scratching out a living. I don't know if he had not yet met his hens and the snow had kept them apart, or what, but I became convinced he needed a little encouragement in order to get to know the girls. The way he scooted underneath a trailer and around the piles of firewood as soon as I exited my car caused me a little concern. So when I saw him in the dog kennel, I grabbed a landing net and the chase was on. It seems unnecessary to reveal all the details of just how many times I caught the bird and how deep of snow we travelled through before he was securely penned with his ladies, but it sort of surprised me just how much of a ruckus Oliver created when in the net, considering that he was yet to emit even a single crow at his new home. Suffice it to say that it's days like this one that allow me to claim "farm chores" as a form of aerobic exercise when my doctor asks just what is it I'm doing to keep my blood sugars down. Do you know, despite my best efforts, for the first few nights Oliver slept outside while the hens marched up the ramp into their coop for the evening? It's hard to help some chickens.

Having gone to this much trouble to set the stage for spring, you can just about imagine my disappointment level when we got another good dumping of snow this past week, followed by a temperature of 21 below zero the morning of March 23rd. Or perhaps you experienced your own disappointment. It was just so demoralizing to see every hint of green covered over and to drive the icy roads. You could say it sent a big pulse of crabbiness through most people I have encountered. We are all just so dog-gone tired of this eternal winter. I've heard it has led to the

exchange of unpleasanties between loved ones. At my house, when the stump-weary logger came home and growled at me, I tried to keep my head down and let the moment pass. Some occasions demand you just don't poke the bear.

About the only good I can see that came from this latest dumping is the arrival of the Evening Grosbeaks at my feeders. The pine grosbeaks from up north have evidently returned from whence they came, and now the strikingly colored birds are here. The males, especially, have the most amazing gold highlights. Like their reddish cousins, these grosbeaks announce their arrival with almost constant calling. You can track the flock's trip across the landscape by the loud calls that keep the flock together. While at the feeders, it seems they spend more time squabbling over their position than they do eating. The cold temperatures seem to really bring the birds in first thing in the morning, and these characters are so engaging it is difficult to leave the house on time to get to work!

A robust, northern finch, the Evening Grosbeak nests in northern coniferous forests well into northern Canada. This species both breeds on the Chippewa, and is a migrant here. In winter this grosbeak is an irregular migrant, often in response to food availability. Based on long-term data submitted to Project Feeder Watch, a citizen science program run by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Bird Studies of Canada, a map of changes in distribution of wintering populations of Evening Grosbeaks and other bird species is available on-line. These maps can provide you a sense of your likelihood of seeing these species in mid-winter, depending on your location.

The Evening Grosbeak is a songbird without much of a song. It mostly uses a loud, simple chirp of a call, and the winter flocks are noisy and alert. Winter flocks that forage for clumped food sources are thought to be an adaptive strategy for survival in cold environments. This bird eats seeds and any available fruits in the winter. Its metabolism is 80% higher at 0 degrees C than at 30 degrees.

We generally see winter flocks of 10 to perhaps 50 or so birds, but sometimes there will be flocks of several hundred. The males are dominant over females in the winter flocks. It's thought that the brightly colored feathers of the head and wings are used as cues in this aggression. Winter flock membership is unstable.

Although a gregarious bird, at feeders you will see some birds attempting to drive off others. In the winter flocks, individual Evening Grosbeaks spend more time scanning for predators than do other species of flocking birds. This is thought to perhaps be the result of a high turnover in flock membership. When a flock reacts to a perceived threat at a feeder, you are more likely to see females staying behind on the feeder than you will the males, which are headed to the nearest cover. It's believed this may be because the males are so brightly colored and more conspicuous than are the females.

Towards the breeding season, the noisy flocks begin to break up into smaller groups, and eventually pairs form. At this time the birds become rather secretive, and their courtship occurs without any elaborate song or display. Their nests are flimsy, located high up in the trees. One year at my house, a pair of Evening Grosbeaks took a liking for the fibrous mat that was lining

one of my basket planters. It was so much fun watching them come in and rob it of nesting materials, that I didn't really care they were wrecking the planter.

In the summer this bird is an insect eater. I read that local populations often increase in response to outbreaks of spruce budworm. In fact, the Evening Grosbeak is sometimes considered to be an indicator of the density of spruce budworms.

Just now it seems like a long time until we might see summer again. But in the good news department, I am happy to report that just in time for 21 below, Oliver has decided to join the hens in the coop. He even appears to be appreciating this easier way of life. And although on the Chippewa things are still frozen up pretty tight, I've heard that to the south of us there are hopeful signs of changing seasons. Over a million snow geese have been staging at Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge in northern Missouri, and the Sandhill cranes are resting along the Platte River in Nebraska before continuing their migration north. So I am taking a little drive down to see the birds. I was thinking it might be best not to return until spring has sprung, the rooster crows, or the bear gets to missing me, whichever comes first.



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